



PHOTO BY ANDY OLENICK.

Dining area that includes a fireplace (not visible).



PHOTO BY ANDY OLENICK.

Muirhead Farmhouse: The Whole-House Experience

BY SARAH MUIRHEAD PETERSDORF AND MIKE PETERSDORF

The car was filled with two adults and five children when it arrived at the front gate of Taliesin near Spring Green, Wisconsin. It was the fall of 1948 and Robert and Elizabeth Muirhead had traveled from Plato Center, Illinois, to see Wright's acclaimed home and studio.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sarah Muirhead Petersdorf, granddaughter of Robert and Elizabeth Muirhead, grew up on the family farm. Today she manages a publishing company with a focus on agriculture and food production. Her husband, Mike Petersdorf, manages the Muirhead Farmhouse. Along with their two sons, Aaron and Alec, they continue to restore the various farm buildings on the property and maintain a two-acre garden and orchard that produces fresh fruits and vegetables for the local community.

Intrigued by Wright's architecture, Robert wanted to see the home he had read about in various magazines. The Muirheads had no invitation, but by a stroke of luck they first met Wright's secretary, Eugene Masselink. Their ensuing conversation led to an invitation to come inside and meet with Wright.

Wright's parting instructions to this Midwestern farm family were to write a letter that detailed what they needed in a new house and how they would use the space. In October 1948, a six-page letter was drafted and mailed to Wright, thereby starting a process that would lead to the construction of one of only a few Wright-designed farmhouses and the only farmhouse built during Wright's lifetime.

Realization of Robert and Elizabeth's dream came slowly. Blueprints did not arrive until early 1950 and in August of that year the Muirheads were told that their \$24,000 budget (plus architect fees) must rise closer to \$40,000 if their requirements were to be met. They agreed, only to find upon assessment of the blueprints by an engineering firm that the house would cost an estimated \$70,000 to build.

Wright's first concept for the home entailed two modules connected only by a very long, open-air pergola. To Elizabeth Muirhead the idea of having to walk outside nearly 100 feet to get from the kitchen to the living room was clearly impractical, especially during the winter. She convinced Wright to not only shorten the space between the two structures but also to enclose it.



Muirhead Farmhouse on a beautiful summer day.

Armed with a mechanical engineer's education and experience as a capable and successful farmer, Robert completed much of the interior work himself. Electrical wiring, the pouring and finishing of much of the concrete flooring, installing many of the doors and windows and completing the built-in cabinetry and shelves helped minimize construction costs. Robert and Elizabeth, along with their five children, moved into the house in the spring of 1953.

Having suffered from a leaky roof, the farmhouse sustained extensive interior and exterior damage over the years and in late August 2003, with the help of farmhands, we began an emergency restoration. Believing the roof would not withstand another winter without collapsing, we started to remove the original roof deck. The extent of the damage was severe and required the replacement of most of the original one-by-six deck boards, portions of the roof joists, sill plates, and much of the exterior parapet siding. Brick chimneys were partially re-built and the northern exterior side of the bedroom wing was tuck pointed to repair damaged areas. A company specializing in flat roofs was hired to install new roofing materials and completed the installation by mid-November, just a couple of weeks before the first snowfall of the season.

Attention was then turned to interior repairs, starting with the bedroom wing, which during the original construction in 1951, required additional fill in order to level the grade. The black dirt from the surrounding farmland that was used had settled over the years,

causing the concrete floor to sink about two inches. Corrective measures required labeling and then removing all partition walls, furniture and shelving in the original five bedrooms. Concrete saws and jackhammers were employed to remove the concrete squares and the floor area was leveled. The concrete squares were then re-poured and finished using the modern equivalent of the original Colorundum powder.

Discussions regarding opening of the home to overnight guests had begun during the bedroom wing renovation. We decided that if the entire home were to be made available to overnight guests, it would be difficult for as many as five guests to share a single bathroom as the Muirhead children had done for so many years. As a result, the bedroom wing was reconstructed with three bedrooms instead of the original five and two new bathrooms were added. While making this change, great attention was paid to Wright's original design concepts and both of the new bathrooms were outfitted with the same shower construction and fixtures found in the original children's bathroom. In addition, most

Of all the updates, replacing the light fixtures was the hardest.



PHOTO BY ANDY OLENICK

Living room with built-in seating and fireplace.

The idea of opening the home to the public post-renovation was never in question, but the idea of offering overnight stays along with breakfast was what stuck with us.

of the original Red Tidewater Cypress boards were re-installed in the bedrooms and bathrooms, as were the original solid Cypress bedroom doors.

Other renovations included the removal and replacement of the east dining room brick walls (interior and exterior), replacement of all electrical wiring, rebuilding the brick garden wall outside the living room, installation and finishing of the interior quarter-inch thick plywood ceiling, repair of the dining room fireplace, removal of exterior paint and stain, re-finishing all exterior and interior Cypress wood, replacement of

the main exterior concrete walkway, and the installation of new ceiling light fixtures.

Of all the updates, replacing the light fixtures was the hardest. Removing the recessed boxes was required to insulate the ceiling and make the home more energy efficient. Each of these boxes was custom made and centered over each four-foot concrete square. A total of 169 fixtures were installed, each being recessed slightly above the plywood ceiling. A four-inch square, plywood cover overlaid each box and was held in place by four screws. In the middle of each cover was a small hole into which was placed a one-inch, clear glass marble. Wright called these “pinpoint” lights, and while they added a wonderful star-like effect to the home, they provided very little light. They also proved to be a fire hazard, having charred the ceiling joists to which they were attached. To improve energy efficiency, the ceiling cavity was packed with insulation. This necessitated replacing the light boxes with recessed, insulated can lights that offer a similar effect and use a small diameter hole, albeit without the marble.

Wright’s drawings for the home included plans for “moveable seats” for both the living and dining rooms, four dining room tables, 24 hassocks, pedestal beds for each bedroom and desks for each of the children’s bedrooms. For Robert Muirhead, who was six feet two inches tall, the moveable seats were considered too low to be practical and only one of the 17 called for was ever made. In 2006, four of the pedestal beds designed for the bedrooms were constructed, as were three of the hassocks, four end tables (miniature versions of the dining room tables) and one of the moveable seats to serve as examples of Wright’s original designs.

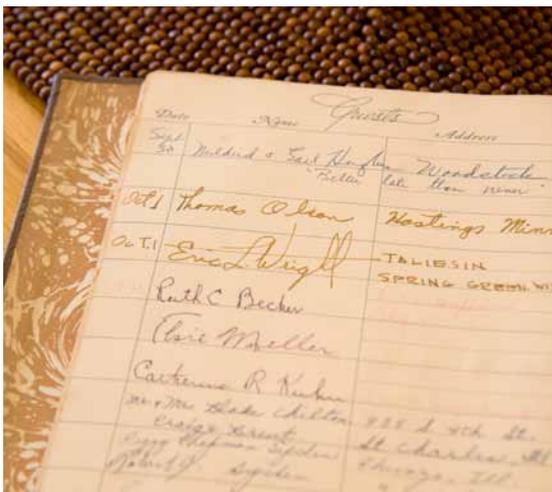


PHOTO BY ANDY OLENICK

Guestbook with Eric Lloyd Wright’s signature.



PHOTO BY ANDY GLENICK

Sunlight entering the Muirhead Farmhouse kitchen.

In June 2004, we moved our family from Minnesota back to Illinois and in December 2005, opened the home for tours and as a bed and breakfast. The idea of opening the home to the public post-renovation was never in question, but the idea of offering overnight stays along with breakfast was what stuck with us. We live in the home along with our two teenage sons, Aaron and Alec, and while the home now has four bedrooms, only the master suite is reserved for overnight guests. Taking one set of guests at a time seems to work best for the family and allows visitors a greater opportunity to experience the home.

In addition to living in a Wright space, guests can see how well it accommodates daily family life. At one end of the home are the workshop, kitchen and dining room and at the other, the living room, utility room and bedroom wing. This separation of work and living areas was based on the Muirheads' needs and their desire to have the living room separate from the dining room and kitchen area

Now surrounded by nearly 800 acres of reclaimed prairie and some active farmland, the restored, inline Usonian looks perfectly at home with the former dairy barn and other farm buildings nearby. We believe that the farm buildings, while not designed by Wright, are certainly a part of the house. For it was farming and

“ Thanks for providing us an opportunity to not only learn more about FLW and your grandparents, but to actually experience the FLW vision. Staying in a FLW home is worth more than 100 house tours! ”

KD and LD, St. Louis, Missouri

the technological advances on the farm in the 1940s that made possible the creation of the farmhouse and which influenced its design. Although these buildings are no longer used for food production, they hold stories of their own and we continue to work towards their restoration. Even the old farm truck next to the barn has significance, as it was once used to haul oats to Taliesin.

Visitors often ask, “How did a common farmer come to build a Wright-designed home?” We have no trouble finding answers to this and numerous other questions about the property. All five of Robert and Elizabeth Muirhead's children—Robert, Jean, Ruth, Margaret and Mary—grew up in the home and continue to return periodically. They recall their favorite and often funny experiences, which we are then able to share with guests.



PHOTO BY ANDY OLENIK.

Master suite, which includes a bathroom and fireplace (not visible).

“After visiting many FLW houses and buildings, this is the first one that has felt like a real home.”

EJ, Tampa, Florida

One tale involves Wright’s visit to the property. As best told by son Robert, Wright roared down the gravel driveway, dust cloud behind him, and pulled up alongside the existing, two-story, white farmhouse. By the time the younger Robert walked over to Wright, the architect had already placed flagged stakes down the middle of what was the apple orchard. Neither of Robert’s parents was home at that time and they did not learn of Wright’s visit until dinner that evening, when the senior Robert asked about the stakes. Son Robert reported that Wright said, “Tell your folks this is where the house is going.” Disappointed they had missed Wright’s visit, the Muirheads nonetheless acceded to Wright’s recommendation, even though it required the removal of several mature apple trees.

Muirhead Farmhouse welcomes guests from all over; they have come from countries such as France, the Netherlands, Australia and Canada, and we often learn as much from our visitors as they learn from us.

In addition to the master suite, overnight guests have access to the home’s living room and outdoor spaces, including the master suite patio. Breakfast is prepared in the kitchen and served in the dining room. We continue the tradition of growing fresh fruits and vegetables as the family always did and we incorporate them into our homemade food. We have even had some guests help with picking apples and strawberries.

A Muirhead Farmhouse stay is essentially a whole-house experience, but with the feel of a home to go along with it. We encourage guests to relax and enjoy the home’s features and how well it blends with its surroundings. We also share with them as much of the family history as we can. Visitors appreciate the opportunity to read the Muirheads’ correspondence with Wright and with Alan Davidson, a Taliesin construction supervisor. It gives them a greater insight into who Wright was and how he dealt with clients.

In addition to providing overnight stays, Muirhead Farmhouse is open by appointment for tours. Per person cost is \$20 for groups of five or fewer persons and \$10 per person for larger groups. Visitors are given guided tours of the entire house and an opportunity to ask questions and take photos. Generally once a year, in May, the house is opened to the public as part of a fundraiser for a performing arts program at the local school, attended by both our sons. It is our way of giving back to the community and the school while creating a greater awareness of Wright and his work.

Even more experiences...

Additional Sites

In addition to the sites detailed in this issue of *SaveWright*, five other Wright-designed properties offer a range of accommodations for overnight stays of different kinds and lengths. Basic information on each is provided below. For more information, visit the individual websites.

Alpine Meadows Ranch (1909)

469 Bunkhouse Road

Darby, MT 59829

Cottages

www.alpinemeadowsranch.com

858.442.8863 | Info@AlpineMeadowsRanch.com

Donald Duncan House (1957)

Polymath Park

1 Usonian Drive

Acme, PA 15610

House: Two bedrooms

www.polymathpark.com

877.833.7829 | info@polymathpark.com

Arnold Jackson House (1957)

N7669 Indian Hills Trails

Beaver Dam, WI 53916

Bed & Breakfast

www.arnoldjacksonhouse.com

920.356.9440 | arnoldjacksonbnb@charter.net

Bernard Schwartz House (1939)

3425 Adams Street

Two Rivers, WI 54241

House: four bedrooms

www.theschwartzhouse.com

612.840.7507

Seth Peterson Cottage (1958)

Mirror Lake State Park

Lake Delton, WI 53940

Cottage

www.sethpeterson.org

877.466.2358 or 608.254.6551



PHOTO BY ANDY GLENICK

Enclosed gallery leading from the garage to the living room, master suite and bedroom wing.

One of the most frequent questions we are asked, especially by local visitors, is if the house is “really a Wright house” or just a “Wright-influenced” home. It probably comes from the fact that the house is really one of Wright’s lesser-known works. It may also be because those who have lived in the area are a bit surprised to learn the house is here.

That is why we have chosen to keep the doors of Muirhead Farmhouse open. It is something that Robert and Elizabeth always did. They welcomed people during construction and in the years that followed. They loved the house and the farm and sharing them. And that is what we like to do as well. ■

To book a stay...

Muirhead Farmhouse (1950)

42W814 Rohrsen Road

Hampshire, IL 60140

one master bedroom,
two people

www.muirheadfarmhouse.com

info@muirheadfarmhouse.com